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ABSTRACT

Academic tracking, one of the most enduring and controversial educational practices, is directly implicated as a link among education, future technical/occupational skill, and the welfare of the U.S. national economy. Tracking's most controversial feature is the potentially harmful effects of bad placement decisions based on such nonacademic criteria as low parental income, race, ethnicity, gender, and special needs. The problem is exacerbated by the rapid displacement of unskilled industrial jobs and a growing demand only for workers having high academic skills. This report outlines the results of an extensive inquiry into the tracking system and presents conclusions and recommendations. Research activities and procedures developed by the National Education Association (NEA) generated a comprehensive analysis of academic tracking. Tracking was found to be very common, becoming more typical during each subsequent school grade. At some point, virtually all students are ability grouped or tracked. Students from diverse ethnic groups are tracked into different classes and curricula. Hispanic and Black students are overrepresented in vocational education and underrepresented in academic tracks. Findings concerning benefits and the role of educational "gatekeepers" are also discussed, along with alternatives to tracking such as the U.S. Department of Education's Regular Education Initiative (REI). Rigid academic tracking creates problems for many students from all socioeconomic and ethnic groups and also creates student isolation by socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Further conclusions and recommendations are discussed. A chronological review of NEA tracking research and a glossary are included. (35 references) (MLH)

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WHY THE NEA IS STUDYING TRACKING

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Academic tracking is nearly universal in secondary schools, and it is very common in elementary schools. Still, tracking is one of the most enduring and controversial issues in American education. Some argue that academic tracking lets high achievers move rapidly and gives low achievers attainable goals and extra help. Others contend that it is unfair to low achievers, creates poor peer models, lowers expectations, leads to lower student achievement, and concentrates minority students in classes having a slow instructional pace.

One of the most persistent challenges within American education is to understand and correct the process by which schools help to perpetuate academic and social inequality. It has been almost a quarter century since the U.S. Office of Education undertook its landmark study of *Equality of Educational Opportunity,* yet little has changed since its 1966 conclusion that

> . . . schools bring little influence to bear on a child's achievement that is independent of his background and general social context; and that this very lack of an independent effect means that the inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school. For equality of educational opportunity through the schools must imply a strong effect of schools that is independent of the child's immediate social environment, and that strong independent effect is not present in American schools. (Coleman, 1966, p. 325)

Many practitioners and researchers attribute this situation to socioeconomic segregation created, in part, by neighborhood patterns or academic ability grouping, which is usually referred to as tracking. While most reviews of the practice from the 1920s to the present (Slavin, 1987) question the benefits of academic tracking for student achievement, some form of between-class ability grouping is nearly universal in secondary schools and is very common in elementary schools (McPartland, Coldiron & Braddock, 1987). In addi-

tion, the recent Carnegie Foundation technical report on the condition of teaching (1988) disclosed that 63 percent of all U.S. teachers feel that "tracking students by ability is a useful way for schools to deal with diversity" (p. 77).

Much of the educational criticism of tracking is based on a social-psychological theory of human behavior. Proponents of this theory contend that an individual's ability to learn is dependent on the expectations of "significant others," following several steps:

1. The social norms and expectations of others define the appropriate behavior for persons in various social situations.
2. Each person learns the definitions of appropriate behavior through interaction with others who are important and significant to him or her.
3. The individual learns to behave in ways that she or he perceives are appropriate and proper for her or him.
4. The individual also acquires conceptions of his/her ability to learn various types of behavior through interaction with others whose evaluations are important to him or her. (Brookover & Erickson, 1969)

Therefore, when low-achieving students are isolated from high-achieving peers, they have little opportunity to acquire the high achievement norms and abilities required for future success. This argument rests on two assumptions: (1) that the type and level of skill possessed by American high school graduates derive in large measure from course content and programs of study, which are determined by perceived group abilities; and (2) that high school curriculum tracking is an important link between education and the economy. It provides this link by sorting graduates into specialized programs (vocational, general, academic, special, etc.) designed to develop skills leading to direct entry into the labor market or into postsecondary schooling. In this view, tracking is very directly implicated as a link among education, future technical/occupational skill, and the welfare of the U.S. national economy. The most controversial element of this process is the potential permanent harmful effects of a bad placement decision based on such nonacademic criteria as low parental income, race, ethnicity, gender, and special needs (Oakes, 1985). This harmful decision is given greater importance because after years of plentiful unskilled industrial jobs, the current era is characterized by rapid displace-

ment of such jobs and a growing demand only for workers having high academic skills (Drucker, 1981; Etzioni, 1983; Leontief, 1982).

This situation caused Mary Hatwood Futrell, past president of the National Education Association (NEA), to argue that tracking has long been abused and misused and "that economically disadvantaged students are far more likely than their middle-class or affluent peers to be labeled 'slow' or 'retarded'" (1988). Committees of NEA members investigating concerns of Black and Hispanic teachers as part of . . . *And Justice for All* (NEA, 1987) also reported the following:

- Many Black students, although "energized" and achieving well in lower elementary grades, begin in the upper elementary grades to lose their enthusiasm. They begin to achieve less and are not encouraged to participate in the full range of academic and extracurricular activities.
- The number of Black students suspended/expelled and placed in special education/emotionally impaired classes consistently tends to be disproportionately higher compared to the total student population.
- The Hispanic community is concerned and uneasy about the effects of education reform on Hispanic students and on continued shortages of Hispanic and bilingual teachers. Of special concern is the increased potential for tracking and the "pushing out" of Hispanic students.
- Some schools abuse and misuse standardized written tests, which often result in the exclusion of students from special programs or services.
- Inappropriate tracking of Hispanic students to nonacademic and learning disabled programs and classes continues.

As a result of these concerns, the delegates to the 1988 NEA Representative Assembly adopted the following resolution:

> The National Education Association believes that academic tracking based on socioeconomic status, race, or sex must be eliminated in all public school settings. The Association urges its affiliates to oppose these practices. (Resolution C-29)

In addition, NEA members called for new "state-of-the-art"

research on how tracking relates to equality of opportunity and an Executive Committee Subcommittee was formed to carry out this investigation.

The current report contains the results of an extensive inquiry, presents a number of conclusions about this very complicated topic, and lists a number of recommendations about academic tracking. The report is augmented by a resource manual (available from NEA/IPD) containing the NEA-commissioned study of academic tracking from the Johns Hopkins University and a transcript of the Critical Issues session on academic tracking presented to the NEA Board of Directors. Subcommittee members intend that NEA activities will allow both research and practice to be enhanced and that well-researched policy alternatives about student academic tracking will be realizable.

PROCEDURES USED IN THIS STUDY OF ACADEMIC TRACKING

The Subcommittee made the decision that a state-of-the-art study of academic tracking had to ensure input from both research and practice. To do this, the Subcommittee undertook sequential activities designed to ensure that all interested parties had the opportunity to contribute to the knowledge base on the topic. The following activities led to the current report:

1. To better understand the current state of academic tracking in schools, including what issues are being debated, what factors are being measured, and why differences of opinion exist, NEA contracted with the Johns Hopkins University (principal investigators: Jomills H. Braddock II and Robert E. Slavin) to comprehensively study academic tracking and to produce four topical reports. This study has produced the following reports:

   (a.) A critical review and "best evidence synthesis' of research on tracking effects, especially on Black and Hispanic students.

   Report received: "Effects of Ability Grouping on African American, Hispanic, and White Students."

   (b.) A study of current national profiles of schools' practices of tracking and an analysis of trends in secondary-level tracking of race-ethnic student subgroups over the past decade.

   Report received: "Tracking of African American, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and White Students: National Patterns and Trends."

   (c.) Exemplary case analyses of successful alternatives to tracking in racially and ethnically heterogeneous schools.

   Report received: "Alternatives to Tracking: Some Exemplary Cases from Practice."

   (d.) Final report.

   Report received: "Tracking Trends, Effects, and Alternatives."

2. To provide the Board of Directors with state-of-the-art knowledge about the pros and cons of academic tracking

and to offer insight into differing researcher and practitioner positions, a Critical Issues session was held during the May 1989 Board of Directors meeting. Presenting at the session were Bob Slavin (Johns Hopkins University), Jeannie Oakes (RAND Corporation and UCLA), and Paul B. Hentz (Chair, NEA Caucus for Educators of Exceptional Children).

3. To provide a case study of the ambitious and controversial attempt by the federal government to place special education students into regular classrooms, the NEA (in September 1989) sponsored a seminar on the Regular Education Initiative (REI). This seminar attempted to provide a fuller understanding of how the REI has operated and to begin the development of proposals for formulating new directions for special education as it relates to the REI, "rights without labels," and the broader issue of tracking. Participants at this seminar included special education policy makers, administrators, researchers, teacher educators, parents, NEA staff, and special education teacher members.
4. To provide input from a wide variety of classroom teachers and NEA leaders, tracking issues were placed on the agendas of all six regional meetings, both of the national conferences, and the NCUEA annual meeting. These sessions were not hearings, but instead were structured to gain maximum discussion and feedback from participants.
5. In addition, NEA/IPD disseminated, upon request, the NEA-commissioned tracking study by the Johns Hopkins University, and to ensure maximum participation at the national and regional meetings, findings from this study and other research on academic tracking were published in *NEA Today*.

These activities generated a comprehensive analysis of academic tracking and also allowed for the articulation of new questions, issues, and perspectives. The following is a summary of the findings and potential policy alternatives.

Where Tracking Is Found

The NEA/Hopkins study found that tracking is very common, and it becomes more typical during each subsequent school grade. In earlier grades, most ability grouping is for reading and math. By middle school, math, reading, and English are usually ability grouped. By the end of middle school, reading disappears as a separate subject and is replaced by science. During high school, English, mathematics, science, and social studies are the subjects most often grouped by ability. This study also found that tracking grows more rigid over time and that the practice of "flexible tracking" or regrouping to create fewer homogeneous ability classes is common only in earlier grades (Braddock, 1989).

Oakes' study of 700 secondary schools (funded by the National Science Foundation) found that all schools group students by ability, whether those schools serve higher- or lower-socioeconomic-status (SES) students and whether those students are Black or white. The difference is that lower-SES schools and predominantly Black schools group students into average- and low-ability courses, while higher-SES schools and predominantly white schools tend to offer only courses for average, above average, and high ability students (Oakes, 1989).

Who Is Tracked

The NEA/Hopkins study found that at some point virtually all students are ability grouped and/or tracked. It also found that students from diverse ethnic groups are tracked into different classes and curricula.

Classes: Black and Native American seniors are overrepresented in both remedial English and remedial mathematics courses. Hispanic seniors are overrepresented in remedial English and remedial mathematics, and especially in special education courses. In contrast, Asian seniors are not overrepresented in any remedial courses. Black, Hispanic, and Native American seniors are underrepresented in both honors English and honors mathematics courses. In contrast

to other race-ethnic subgroups, Asian seniors are overrepresented in honors mathematics, but not honors English courses (Braddock, 1989).

In addition, Oakes' (1989) secondary school study reported that while the total number of science courses offered is the same for all types of students (high and low SES, Black and white), more different types of mathematics courses are offered in schools that service higher-SES student populations. Also, she found a distinct correlation between the availability of higher-level mathematics and science courses (college preparatory, advanced placement, etc.) and the schools' serving higher-SES white students.

Curricula: Hispanic students are overrepresented in vocational education and underrepresented in academic tracks. Native American students are overrepresented in general education and underrepresented in academic tracks. Asian students are underrepresented in general and vocational tracks and overrepresented in academic tracks. Black students are overrepresented in vocational education and significantly underrepresented in academic and general program tracks.

Does Tracking Benefit Students?

The NEA/Hopkins study found that tracking plans have beneficial effects on student achievement when they incorporate the following features:

1. Students remain in heterogeneous classes most of the day and are regrouped by performance level only in such subjects as reading and mathematics in which reducing heterogeneity is particularly important.
2. The grouping plan reduces heterogeneity in the specific skill being taught.
3. Group assignments are both flexible and frequently reassessed.
4. Teachers adapt their level and pace of instruction in regrouped classes to accommodate students' levels of readiness and learning rates. (Slavin, 1989)

This means that those grouping procedures that keep students in heterogeneous classes except for a particular subject, that are constantly reevaluated, and that accommodate all achievement levels *do appear to be educationally effective.* By contrast, ability-grouped class assignments, special pro-

grams for the gifted, and special education for students with learning problems do not generally meet the four criteria. Typically, they segregate students all or most of the day, are based on general ability or achievement rather than skill in a specific subject, tend to be highly inflexible, and are likely to create racially identifiable classes. According to Slavin (1989), the evidence at all levels finds no benefit in ability-grouped class assignments or special education assignments. He also reports only "inconsistent and flawed" evidence in favor of special programs for the gifted.

Within-class ability grouping, which allows students in homogeneous subgroups to receive instruction at their own level and to progress at their own rate, is very common in elementary reading and mathematics, but is rarely seen in secondary schools (Barr & Dreeben, 1983; Hallinan & Sorensen, 1983). These plans generally conform to the four requirements for "effective ability grouping" since students are grouped by specific rather than general skills—and within-class groupings are easy to change, at least in principle. Most teachers do adapt their level and pace of instruction to meet students' needs (Barr & Dreeben, 1983).

Tracking and Gatekeepers

Oakes (1989) adds to the four features above by showing the critical importance of exposing students to educational "gatekeepers," which qualify them for advanced work. In science and mathematics, for example, at the senior high level the most critical course is calculus since it is a prerequisite for entry to most science, math, and technology-related majors in college. Without high school calculus, most students must begin college by taking "remedial" calculus classes. This setback often means that it is virtually impossible to obtain a science or math-related baccalaureate degree in four years.

At the junior high school level, Oakes defines eighth grade algebra and ninth grade geometry as "critical gatekeepers" since students who take these courses early are the ones most likely to be ready for calculus by grade 12. Acquiring "gatekeeper" knowledge is a particular problem for students in lower-SES high schools since these courses are often not offered. In addition, Oakes reports that when more than one "gatekeeper" class is offered, it is almost always in a higher-SES, predominantly white school. Schools serving lower-SES and minority students tend to have a single accelerated class, while those populated by higher-SES and white students usually offer many.

Females and Technology Gatekeepers:

Many researchers have noted that female students have historically been underrepresented in mathematics and science classes and careers. Marcia Lynn and Janet Hyde in their recent study, "Gender, Mathematics, and Science" found that there is no reason to believe that this will always be the case. Differences in boys' and girls' math and science abilities have dwindled to almost nothing in the last twenty years, and current differences exist mostly because girls still don't have as much confidence in their abilities in these subjects as boys do, and neither are they often encouraged to take these classes.

The difference in perceived mathematics/science ability remains sizable, with 55 percent of females and 66 percent of males reporting they are good at math. A survey of eighth graders in California in 1987 revealed that 39 percent of boys and 12 percent of girls believe that boys understand science better than girls do. While this causes female students to become less willing to select science and math classes and curricula, Lynn and Hyde say the actual differences between males and females "no longer exist for verbal ability, spatial visualization and mathematics computation." One sex difference remains: Men still are faster at mentally rotating a figure, but there are no differences in accuracy, and training reduces the speed differences.

Ability levels may have equalized because men's and women's careers have converged in the last two decades, but it takes time for stereotypes to die, particularly in schools. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) says schools should work to include all underrepresented groups, including females, in math education. NCTM's national mathematics standards, which are about to be released, will include suggestions for changes in curricula and classroom practices to improve the performance of women and minorities.

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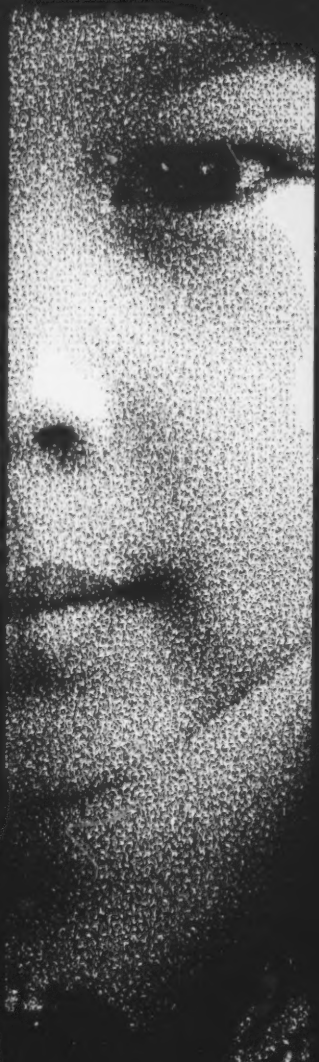
ACADEMIC TRACKING

Report of the NEA Executive Committee
Subcommittee on Academic Tracking



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Report of the NEA Executive Committee
Subcommittee on Academic Tracking

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While there seems to be agreement that tracking creates problems, its mere elimination would also create profound difficulties. Special education practitioner Paul Hentz (1989) points out that a classroom containing students with different cultural, economic, and environmental backgrounds and with a wide range of academic and physical abilities is very difficult to teach and requires optimal conditions and reduced class size. While research on the effects of class size yields mixed results, studies that do support class size reductions indicate that effective elementary education requires a class of no more than fifteen students. Unless this fifteen-student goal is attained, there is a major question of whether high student outcomes for all students can be maintained in a diverse classroom. Attempts to eliminate tracking without first addressing the issues of class size, diversity, and funding are likely to create more problems than solutions.

To identify programs designed to replace rigid ability grouping and tracking with educationally sound alternatives, the NEA/Hopkins study examined a number of current experiments. In addition, the Subcommittee decided to study the U.S. Department of Education's Regular Education Initiative (REI) as a "top down" attempt to mandate "regularized" programs for many special needs students, and we also investigated an NEA-sponsored Mastery In Learning Project that is attempting to accomplish school-based change and eliminate perceived problems caused by student academic grouping. None of these alternatives permits a scientific comparison with traditional tracking, but the Subcommittee has noted that the quality of program outcomes appears to be affected by where decisions are made and by what data are included within the decision-making process.

Alternatives: Elementary School

In the elementary grades there are three major alternatives to tracking: (1) whole-class instruction in reading; (2) flexible, usually cross-grade, grouping plans (e.g., the continuous-progress plan or the Joplin plan) that often have a strong mainstreaming emphasis; and (3) moving from homogeneous grouping to heterogeneous grouping.

Most elementary schools use heterogeneous class assignment practices, but they usually group students for reading and often for math. However, many school districts have begun to experiment with reading programs that use either whole-class instruction or heterogeneous, randomly assigned reading groups. This usually occurs in the context of a move toward whole-language instruction or integrated language arts programming.

The NEA/Hopkins study found that some teachers are doing away with ability grouping in reading by teaching a whole class and then working with individuals or groups of students who need assistance. These teachers often use groups during instruction, but they typically form them heterogeneously (e.g., by the location of desks in the room, color of shirts or sweaters, plaids or stripes, etc.).

Another promising experiment is based on the premise that differences among students (in such subjects as reading and math) must be taken into account in instruction, but that flexible groupings or individualized instruction is more beneficial than more rigid within- or between-class ability grouping. In theory, flexible plans enable the regular classroom to serve a wide variety of students and to use an entire school staff to support students' success.

One type of flexible grouping procedure that is currently in use is a form of the Joplin Plan, in which students are in heterogeneous classes most of the day, but are regrouped for reading across grade lines and according to reading level. Other experiments include team teaching involving special education and Chapter 1 teachers with regular classroom teachers; individualized "learning centers" as an alternative to traditional ability grouping; and such continuous-progress programs as DISTAR, ECRI, USAIL, and PEGASUS, which allow students to move through a hierarchy of reading and math skills at their own rates, with frequent regrouping according to individual progress.

One limitation to these programs is that individual learning situations for low-achieving students deprive those students of the benefits of exposure to high-achieving peers. This may explain the finding that such individualized programs as the Adaptive Learning Environments Model generally have no greater instructional effectiveness than do traditional methods (Fuchs & Fuchs, in press; Wang & Birch, 1984).

However, flexible grouping programs that combine cooperative learning techniques with within-class skill grouping apparently can accelerate student learning in reading, writing, and mathematics (see Slavin, Stevens & Madden, 1988;

Johnson & Johnson, 1989). These programs include Cooperative Learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1989), Team-Assisted Individualization—Mathematics (Slavin, 1985), and Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (Stevens, Madden, Slavin & Farnish, 1987).

The most common ability grouping experiment in elementary schools is heterogeneous assignments to self-contained classes. In some cases, students are randomly assigned to classes; in others, students might be assigned to reading groups and then reassigned to heterogeneous classes. For example, a school with three third grades might assign students to nine reading groups and then assign groups 1, 4, and 9 to one class; 2, 5, and 8 to another; and 3, 6, and 7 to a third.

Alternatives: Middle and High Schools

Very few middle and high schools have abandoned ability grouping, although some are experimenting with reducing the number of groups or the number of subjects in which ability grouping is used. Many schools (especially middle schools) allow diverse groups of students (i.e., regular and special education) and teachers to work together in cooperative learning groups in efforts to enhance all students' achievement levels.

Alternatives: Case Study — Top Down Educational Change, The Regular Education Initiative

The Subcommittee found that a most complex and difficult area of academic tracking relates to the education of special needs students. The difficulties became particularly evident when we studied the attempt by the federal government to regularize the education of special education students. Because researchers (such as Oakes, Slavin, and Brookover) and key education policy makers have referred to special education as a rigid track and because of the controversial attempt to implement the Regular Education Initiative (REI), the Subcommittee decided to analyze it as an example of "top down" educational change. The following is a summary of that study.

Background

About 11 percent of the U. S. population from birth to twenty years of age are classified as eligible to receive special education. The largest handicapping condition is that affecting almost 2 million individuals who are identified as "learning disabled," a category representing 47 percent of special education students and almost 5 percent of the total

U.S. student population. "Learning disabled" is also a most difficult and ambiguous category, and it is filled with controversy.

- ☐ The term "learning disabled" represents many kinds of problems, both academic and developmental, making identification difficult.
- ☐ Difficulty describing the condition leads to difficulty determining valid criteria.
- ☐ Lack of agreed-on criteria allows for disparate decisions by state and local education agencies on when a learning disability becomes a handicapping condition.
- ☐ Many standardized tests used in the assessment of learning disabled students have problems in terms of validity, reliability, and interpretation.
- ☐ The choice of definitions is often decided by financial considerations.

Problems exist within special education, regular education for special populations, and the relationship between regular and special education. Research by Slavin, Oakes, and others has raised serious questions about the value of "separated" education for special needs students. During the 1986–87 school year, 41 percent of the special education students who exited school did not receive a diploma or certificate. Instead, they "dropped out," reached the maximum age, or exited because of some other reason (e.g., expulsion, suspension, disappearance, etc.). It should be understood, however, that it is hard to evaluate the quality of program outcomes since special education collects little efficacy data and no one has produced evidence that special needs students would have accomplished equal or better graduation rates or achievement scores if they had been placed outside of the special education environment.

This situation has created significant policy issues concerning student placement and the interpretation of P.L. 94-142 regarding how to place students in the "least restrictive environment," while still assuring that each child is placed where he or she can receive "an education which is appropriate to his or her individual needs."

Educators, parents, and policy makers have, for many years, fought to ensure that all special needs students would be correctly placed in a suitable learning environment and that

they would have a qualified special teacher. While this has often allowed for meeting the unique needs of special students, it has also served to isolate many students and teachers from the regular education population. Before the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, handicapped children were often left out of regular public school education systems. Since P.L. 94-142 became law, there has been movement toward placing students in a regularized environment, and by the 1986–87 school year, most special education students were educated in regular classes or through a combination of regular classes and a resource room. Still, almost 32 percent of special education students and 24 percent of "learning disabled" students are placed in an "isolated" special education environment.

In many ways, these programs that isolate special education students, their teachers, and their curriculum are the most removed facet of American education, and they have many critics. These critics have claimed that special education requirements have not led to "expected" outcomes; that the paperwork has become oppressive, standardized, and ritualized without benefit to the client population; that the regulations and classifications have kept students out or in; and that teachers have no control over programs.

Much of this criticism was contained in a 1985 policy paper from Assistant Secretary Madeline Will of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS). This policy, the REI, was designed to stress Will's commitment to the implementation of P.L. 94-142 regarding "least restrictive environment." In her administration, "least restrictive environment" through the REI would be the "core value" of the department. It was intended that the REI would

> ... assure the maximum possible development of children with special needs provided that such children, to the maximum extent appropriate, are educated with children without special needs. Children with special needs shall be placed outside the regular educational environment only when the nature or severity of their special need is such that education in a less restrictive educational prototype with the use of supplementary aides and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (Education Department policy on Least Restrictive Environment) Will, M.E. (1986).

While being sensitive to the problems of special education, NEA has for some time been concerned about the effect of

the REI on the education of regular and special needs students. Many of our special education members and others in the special education community Hentz (1989) have expressed worry that the REI promotes a "singular, bureaucratic solution to the complex issue of the education of special needs students" and that the initiative is based on financial rather than educational considerations. In addition, misgivings have been expressed that the REI has offered classroom teachers little or no input into those placement decisions altering the learning environment.

Intention of the REI

Advocates of the REI saw it as a way to eliminate the polarity between special and general education. They also hoped that it would ensure that regular classrooms would be better able to deal with learning diversity and would be made more inclusive. In this respect, REI advocates have wanted special education to be used to improve/reform regular education. This would in turn improve education for children with disabilities by both modifying regular education programs and maximizing regular education alternatives. The specific reforms of REI advocates included

- ☐ Enforcing the use of research on best practices in regular and special education.
- ☐ Ensuring that students not be stigmatized by a classification label or spurious testing.
- ☐ Understanding that all learning is mediated through a *social process* and that it is important to end the educational separation of special populations.
- ☐ Enhancing school-site decisionmaking.
- ☐ Saving money through the elimination of duplication.

These reforms, as they relate to student isolation and stigmatization, are very similar to the position of the educators who have described the problems associated with rigid academic tracking (Oakes, Braddock, Futrell, etc.). The NEA, the Council for Exceptional Children, and the American Association of School Administrators issued a joint response, in 1987, to the regular/special education relationship that also called for more regular and special education staff collaboration and the integration of students to ensure access to a full continuum which

. . . can help improve and expand the services

> available to exceptional children and, we hope, improve and expand the services available to all children.

In addition, the joint statement called for the continued integration of exceptional children on regular school campuses for necessary total service.

> We call for continued efforts in this regard . . . that . . . are consistent with the individual educational needs of the exceptional child, the educational needs of the other children with whom the child will be educated, and the ability of the professionals involved to provide the education all of the children require.
>
> The . . . principle of least restrictive environment, within the context of individual decision making, assures each exceptional child access to a full continuum of quality special education alternatives. Each child must have the alternatives which are most educationally appropriate to his or her needs.

How special and regular education relate is a major and growing issue. Current estimates are that about one-third of students in most big-city school districts would test into traditional special education if there were sufficient funds. At the same time, the federal government in the early 1980s had backed away from its commitment to public education, underfunded Chapter 1, and pitted it against special education. This caused all education to take cuts and regular education administrators to use REI funds to augment their shrinking budgets (e.g., in order to hire paraprofessionals). Therefore, while the goal of eliminating the isolation of regular and special education is seen by all parties as worthwhile and important, problems arose when states, districts, and schools attempted to actually implement REI programs.

Implementation

It is difficult to describe the actual regularizing of special education because every attempt has been unique to a particular school, district, and/or state. Marilyn Wessels, president of Schools Are for Everyone (SAFE), describes the situation as follows:

> The message OSERS (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services) sends to states is not clear on what "least restrictive

> environment" means for children. The kind of integration children now get depends on where they live. And even within the same district, it can vary from building to building. (*Education Daily*, January 24, 1990)

It is now generally agreed that implementation of the REI and most other regularization programs has been very problematic and educationally ineffective. Much of the problem with REI implementation is that in some state and local education agencies, activities termed "REI" have been used merely to legitimatize budget cuts, to keep children out of programs, or to promote other noneducational agendas.

Most of the problems of REI implementation relate to decisions being made by a few persons located away from where a student is placed and educated and by persons who are not accountable for outcomes. Decisions made away from a "school team" that includes regular and special teachers, administrators, special staff, and parents are ineffective, resented, and problematic. This is true whether decisions are made at the federal, state, or local level.

The problem is that REI policy makers and administrators did not include local-level school-based teams as placement and program decision makers. They did not begin to address the issues of class size and resource allocation. Also, they did not provide for proper preparation or training of the regular or special educators on how to use regularization to accomplish academic enhancement. Teachers were relegated almost exclusively to the implementation of a policy over which they had no control and which they often perceived as educationally harmful.

How it could happen that an attempt would be made to implement a major educational policy, having a massive impact on millions of children, without adequate research, design, inclusion of participants, and training can best be understood in light of the testimony of William J. Gainer, director, Education and Employment Issues, Human Resources Division of GAO, before the Subcommittee on Select Education, Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives (September 7, 1989). Gainer was responsible for a management audit of the programs and activities of OSERS, including the REI. This audit was done by studying headquarters and field managers in August 1988. The audit resulted in the following conclusions:

- ☐ Over three-quarters of OSERS managers and senior staff believed that its overall management approach, during the period

of REI implementation, had a negative effect on the day-to-day operations of their organizational units.

- ☐ A primary reason for those negative feelings was the perception of an excessive involvement in component activities by the Office of the Assistant Secretary (Will and her staff).
- ☐ Sixty percent of the audit respondents said that Will's office had done a poor job of establishing goals, coordinating component activities, and responding to program concerns raised by senior OSERS officials, regional office staff, and constituents.
- ☐ OSERS components generally developed operational plans in support of anticipated budget expenditures, but they had no strategic plans for multiyear periods to determine if objectives were achieved.
- ☐ More than 75 percent of the respondents identified numerous human resource management problems, such as excessive staff vacancies and training inadequacies.
- ☐ Nearly half of the grants management staff characterized the evaluation and monitoring of OSERS grantee performance as inadequate.
- ☐ State special education and vocational rehabilitation directors identified a lack of program monitoring and technical assistance from OSERS.

As a result of these problems, the components responsible for program quality lacked such critical elements of strategic planning as the means to

- ☐ Set a reasonable number of major goals
- ☐ Monitor progress against these goals
- ☐ Provide managers with periodic feedback on success in meeting these goals

Overall, 79 percent of the respondents believed that former Assistant Secretary Will's management approach negatively influenced their organizational units. Only 5 percent found Will's approach to be positive.

Following the GAO testimony, Robert R. Davila, the new Assistant Secretary for OSERS, also provided testimony. In his statement he reported that

> Although we have questions about the methodology on which the GAO report was based, many of the conclusions are consistent with my own assessment of management problems in OSERS. In particular, I have concerns regarding excess centralization of authority, lack of collegiality and meaningfully shared decision making, poor communications internally and externally, and problems with obtaining and allocating organizational resources.

Outcomes of the REI

The REI produced some exciting experimentation, drew more attention to regular/general education collaboration, and increased awareness of the need for integration in a student's Individual Educational Program (IEP). Many programs that were implemented under the heading of the REI, however, had a spurious implementation, in pieces, with no cohesive base, and no standard for replication.

Based on the GAO study and the testimony of Assistant Secretary Davila, it appears that given the problems inside OSERS between 1982 and 1989, any attempt to implement effective mainstreaming, the REI, or any program for special education students would have had a most difficult time succeeding. The problems and unhappiness found throughout the special education community appear to be symptomatic of the problems in the federal and state bureaucracies. It also appears that until the weaknesses of the special education policy structure and the issue of restructuring the location of decision making and accountability are dealt with, these problems are not likely to be resolved.

Management problems at OSERS are not enough to explain all the issues in special education. No matter who is in charge of OSERS, deciding on special education needs and paying for programs represent a huge challenge. The role of the federal government in guiding and financing special education programs is open to question.

It is clear that to understand the federal role in special education and the use of P.L. 94-142 and P.L. 99-457 requires looking at the total needs and structure of education as it relates to all students. It is also clear that so many students now have "special needs" that the current special education

system cannot be made large enough to accommodate their demands. If programs are to be successful, the decisions relating to who is served and how they are served will have to be made by those responsible and accountable for providing the services. In this respect, the old individual educational plan (IEP) did not prove successful, and neither have "top down" regularized formulas.

Alternatives: Case Study — School-Based Educational Change

During our investigation of academic tracking, our Subcommittee found many examples of how NEA members have attempted to use school-level mechanisms to make schools more productive, to accomplish greater student achievement, and to alter inappropriate student grouping. One such project is the work of English teachers from the Parkway (Missouri) Education Association who decided to eliminate the "low" track, to avoid all-Black classes, and to address the student failure rate. The low track has been replaced with an additional period of English (called "Tutorial") for designated small groups of students having difficulty with reading/writing skills. The program is working, the classes are more heterogeneous, and the failure rate is dropping.

One example of just how this process of change might take place came from the NEA-sponsored Mastery In Learning Project and from the teachers, administrators, and school employees at the Westwood Primary School in Dalton, Georgia. Westwood has approximately 565 students in kindergarten and first and second grade classes. The socio-economic range of the school extends from very low to very high. Achievement test scores are good, parental and community support is strong, and staff morale is high. Westwood has a staff of twenty-six classroom teachers, four full-time specialists, four part-time specialists, eleven full-time paraprofessionals, fourteen part-time paraprofessionals, a lead teacher, an assistant principal, and a principal. Ten of the professional staff hold bachelor's degrees, ten educational specialist degrees, seventeen master's degrees, and one a doctoral degree.

Westwood became involved with the NEA/Mastery In Learning Project during the 1985–86 academic year. Initially, the staff expressed some concerns about such issues as student behavior in common areas (hallways, bathrooms, lunchroom) and the need for more child-centered considerations in curriculum development. Other less blatant, but persistent, concerns included the way students were placed in classroom groups. The Grouping Committee formed to address this concern.

The Grouping Committee consisted of eight classroom teachers and the lead teacher, all of whom had chosen to participate in the work of this committee, meeting for one-hour sessions each month over a two-year period. Committee members also completed frequent reading assignments between meetings. Typical of organizational change, the early meetings had little clarity and centered mainly around personal experiences related to various forms of grouping. Some discussions were about placing students in classroom groups, others about grouping within the classroom for instructional purposes, and still others about grouping across classroom lines. The committee found the research on the issue to be confusing and sometimes contradictory. Looking at its own circumstances, the committee did, however, make an interesting discovery:

> Westwood teachers did not know how classroom groups were formed within the school. This discovery was particularly startling because the staff perceived itself as open and communicative, characterized by cooperation and free give-and-take between teachers and administrators. The reality of the situation was that the principal and lead teacher had a clearly defined method of assigning students to classroom groups, with no intention of secrecy. Nevertheless, most teachers did not know what method that was. They simply accepted the students assigned to them without understanding the intended make-up of the group. The first definitive task of the Grouping Committee was to learn about classroom grouping practices in effect at Westwood School. (Nations, 1989, p. 30–31)

Upon investigation, the committee learned that kindergarten was structured to be heterogeneous, with each class receiving students having a range of abilities measured by a preschool assessment instrument. First grade had "controlled heterogeneity," with students assigned on the basis of achievement, study skills, social behavior, and the kindergarten teacher's predictions. Second grade students were assigned homogeneously to language arts, based on reading ability. Once assigned, students spent the major part of the school day within these homogeneous groups.

After the committee understood Westwood's situation, it began to investigate the issues surrounding homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping of students and questioned if

Westwood's grouping procedures had been productive.

> With a fairly comprehensive awareness and understanding of the research on grouping, and reinforced by numerous discussions with colleagues and peers, members of the Grouping Committee finally came to the difficult conclusion that the homogeneous grouping of second-grade students for a major part of the day was inappropriate and created a variety of problems for both students and teachers. The Grouping Committee further concluded that the methods for placing students in classrooms in kindergarten and first grade were consistent with the school's philosophy, appropriate with maximum development of young children, workable for instructional purposes, and readily accepted by the community. (Nations, 1989, p. 32)

The committee did not attempt to impose its will on the rest of the staff. Instead, it presented a review of its research and its recommendations to the staff and informed them that because the proposed changes would mostly affect second grade teachers, all second grade teachers would have to agree to the changes, or no changes would be made.

> The proposals were unsettling to these teachers, not only because methods of grouping would be revised, but because changes would be required in the ways they would teach on a day-to-day basis. . . . They talked all through all of their negative reactions and anxieties. Finally, one teacher said, "Let's face it. If we are thinking about the children we know what we should do. We're just afraid to change. (Nations, 1989, p. 33)

The staff made the decision to restructure student grouping procedures for second grade students. They are currently working within the Baltimore Plan of stratified heterogeneous grouping (one-third higher-ability, one-third middle-ability, and one-third lower-ability students in each class). This change has been shown to have produced successful results for both students and teachers.

While the staff of the Westwood Primary School feels that the new grouping procedures work to meet the needs of the students, there is no reason to believe the Baltimore Plan or any other is appropriate for all students or even similar

students in comparable situations. If the situation at the Westwood School eventually changes, this might require a modification of the student-grouping procedures. This change would be made through research and school-based decision making.

CONCLUSIONS

There are no easy answers to questions about the educational value of tracking students by academic ability. In many ways, current work in this area by the NEA and others raises more questions than it offers solutions. Debate about the academic desirability of the Regular Education Initiative and mainstreaming for special education students underscores the complexity of the issues involved. And discussion of how schools can hope to offer all students the gatekeepers for future academic and life success only deepens the conundrum.

What is clear is that rigid academic tracking creates academic problems for many students from all socioeconomic and ethnic groups and also creates student isolation by socioeconomic status and ethnicity. It is also clear that tracking is and is likely to continue to be a "way of life" in most American schools, including those that are socioeconomically and ethnically homogeneous. This situation can be altered, but tracking will not be replaced until practitioners and parents are confident that any replacement will contribute to a better school organization with a strong probability of higher student achievement. As experimentation with alternatives to tracking continues, the following must be considered.

1. *Tracking does not begin after children arrive at school.*

Children come to school with a readiness for learning based on parental care, nutrition, health, etc. Effective intervention must take place early. We must stop problems before they exist. To do this would require concentrating our efforts and funding such early education services as prenatal care, day-care, latch-key programs, early intervention programs for children who are disabled or at risk, and permanent shelters for homeless children.

The most effective schooling programs to overcome the achievement differences that students bring from home must take place early. While raising requirements for high school graduation might improve the knowledge and skills of some graduates, it fails to address the underlying problems of education in America. The way that we have structured our schools does not allow us to provide the help needed by our preschoolers or our five- and six-year-olds.

2. *Differences exist between desired outcomes and the methods of achieving these outcomes.*

If there is a difference of principle between the advocates and the critics of tracking, it relates to the role and desirability of student diversity. This division became very clear in our study of the REI where we found that while advocates and critics each recognize the reality and importance of student diversity, many critics of tracking and proponents of the REI see diversity, and especially categorical differences, as something to be overcome through the integrated "social process" of schooling.

> There are not two distinct types of students—special and regular.... All students differ along continuums of intellectual, physical, and psychological characteristics. Individual differences are universal and thus the study of deviant people is really a study of all humankind.
>
> ... The designation of arbitrary cutoffs does not make students any more different between the special and regular groups than within these groups.
>
> In short, there are not—as implied by a dual system — two distinctly different types of students, that is, those who are special and those who are regular. Rather, all students are unique individuals, each with his/her own set of physical, intellectual, and psychological characteristics. (Stanback & Stanback, 1984)

The joint statement and the critics of the REI, however, see diversity, and the encouragement of diversity, as a positive outcome of education, even between categories of educators and students.

> The strength of our education system is in its diversity — diversity of students, professionals, and learning environments. Exceptional students, be they handicapped or gifted and talented, are one group of diverse learners both in terms of what they need to learn and how they can best learn. Special educators are the educational professionals qualified to provide specially designed instruction to exceptional children who require such instruction, and special education programs are an integral part of the necessary diverse education provided to children.
>
> Some children with exceptional abilities can

> benefit from the instruction provided by general education, but many exceptional children are not able to benefit from some or all of such instruction because of their unique learning styles or because they require a differentiated curriculum.

While disagreement about categorical diversity is important, it is, in the long run, easy to reach agreement. Both sides of the argument base their beliefs on the conception of how students best learn. The problem is that neither side has adequate data on which to make a viable public education policy. In the case of special education, this lack of data applies to the implementation of both the REI and the dual system it hoped to replace. Without adequate, reliable, valid research on the achievement of all types of regular and special populations, we may always disagree; however, given a better research base for decision making, agreement is more likely. This superior research base related to quality educational outcomes will have to include regular and special populations. It must also be made available to all educational decision makers and especially the local teams (teachers, school administrators, parents, etc.) which must make immediate informed decisions. Even the highest-quality, most relevant research that is shared only within the academic community has no real value.

3. Class size and diversity are related.

From a classroom teacher's perspective, when incompatible learning styles are added to a classroom, the number of students in a classroom must be decreased, or the ability to optimize academic performance for all students will be sacrificed. A classroom containing students with different cultural and environmental backgrounds, a wide range of academic abilities, and a mix of economically disadvantaged, disabled, and basic education students is very difficult to teach. Newer research on the effects of class size indicates that numbers must be reduced to about fifteen students to achieve high outcomes for all students in a diverse classroom Hentz (1989). Since it is unlikely that class size will be reduced in any meaningful way in the near future, tracking will remain an important part of American education. To resolve the inequities of tracking will require both reform within the educational infrastructure and the reordering of national priorities.

4. Any meaningful change must be at the individual building level.

From our investigation of the top down and school-based attempts at meaningful change, as well as virtually all of the

research into the creation of effective school programs, it has become evident to the Subcommittee that change must come one school at a time. Education takes place inside school buildings, among teachers, students, parents, school staff, and administrators. No meaningful change can happen without the involvement of all stakeholders as decision makers. Decisions made away from a "school team" that includes regular and special teachers, administrators, special staff, and parents are ineffective, resented, and problematic. This is true whether decisions are made at the federal, state, or local level.

5. *Neither tracking nor heterogeneous grouping is necessarily good or bad.*

The effectiveness of grouping depends on the specific situation and the needs within a school. If ability grouping is to be effective, it must have the following characteristics:

- ☐ Flexibility
- ☐ Correction of specific learning difficulties
- ☐ High expectations for all students
- ☐ Accountability of the system
- ☐ No negative stereotyping

6. *Teachers must be prepared to work in restructured schools and with heterogeneous populations.*

Teachers have found certain activities to be helpful when working with heterogeneous groups in the same classroom. These include cooperative learning, peer teaching, whole-class teaching, individualization of instruction, team teaching, and the use of a theme approach or "integrated day" instruction.

Another category of effective flexible grouping includes techniques that combine cooperative learning with within-class skill grouping. Programs of this type include the Cooperative Learning Model (Johnson, Johnson & Anderson, 1976), Team-Assisted Individualization — Mathematics (Slavin, 1985), and Cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition (Stevens, Madden, Slavin & Farnish, 1987). A number of studies have found that these programs significantly accelerate student learning in reading, writing, and mathematics. They lend themselves to team teaching between regular classroom teachers and special and/or compensatory education teachers and are often used in such collaborative arrangements (see Slavin, Stevens & Madden, 1988). Individualized programs, such as the Adaptive Learning Environments Model (ALEM), also frequently make use of team teaching among regular and special teachers, but

research on ALEM and related models has generally found them to be no more instructionally effective than traditional methods (Fuchs & Fuchs, in press; Wang & Birch, 1984).

7. *There are preconditions to the elimination of tracking and ability grouping.*

Attempts to eliminate tracking outside the context of restructuring schools and without first addressing the issues of class size, diversity, and funding are likely to end in failure.

8. *The effective elimination of academic tracking requires adequate preparation and resources.*

Federal and state mandates without adequate resources for training and implementation have no chance for success.

As practiced in most schools, academic tracking does more harm than good. However, absent viable alternatives, schools will continue to utilize tracking systems. Those school systems that have successfully eliminated tracking have done so through school restructuring and other activities. In this light, the Subcommittee recommends the following:

General Recommendations

1. Schools must work to eliminate the abuses created by rigid academic tracking of students.
2. Early education for all students must be universally implemented, properly staffed, and funded.
3. All students should be placed according to their unique educational needs with the opportunity for alternative placement as their individual needs change.
4. Schools and school districts should strive for heterogeneous rather than homogeneous grouping of students. When grouping is used, it must have the following characteristics to be effective:
   a. flexibility
   b. correction of specific learning difficulties
   c. high expectations for all students
   d. accountability of the system
   e. no negative stereotyping
5. Class size must be reduced to meet the varied needs of students, particularly as classrooms become more heterogeneous.
6. Schools must be staffed to meet the needs of all students. Sufficient curricular offerings with licensed practitioners must be available so that all students have the opportunity to take gatekeeper classes.
7. Professional development programs should enable school staff to develop the necessary skills for working with heterogeneous groups of students in a multicultural, restructured school environment.
8. Teacher education programs should be designed to

prepare all teachers to work with students in multicultural, heterogeneous situations.

9. Programs which serve the needs of non-college bound students must be strengthened, modernized, and properly funded.
10. Programs for all students must lead to meaningful outcomes in which students acquire the skills necessary to become successful and productive members of society.

Association Recommendations

1. Among the school restructuring activities of the NEA Center for Innovation in Education, a focus should be the development of effective alternatives to academic tracking and the elimination of rigid and discriminatory grouping of students.
2. NEA will provide a clearinghouse for successful alternatives to academic tracking.
3. NEA will urge its affiliates to continue their efforts to restructure schools, including effective alternatives to academic tracking.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE NEA AND STUDENT TRACKING: A CHRONOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

The following chronology highlights National Education Association policy, positions, and activities on student ability tracking over a period of twenty-five years.

☐ 1966 Grouping in the Public Schools, Research Memo 966-17, Research Division.

Provided a highly objective overview of systems of classifying pupils for instructional purposes on the basis of such predetermined criteria as chronological age, sex, mental test scores, interests, behavior, and/or achievement.

☐ 1968 *Amicus Curiae Brief.*

NEA filed an amicus curiae brief with the U.S. Court of Appeals, District of Columbia Circuit, in the *Hobson v. Hansen* case contending that tracking based on standardized test scores discriminated against black students in the District of Columbia's schools. The court agreed with the NEA position.

☐ 1968 *Ability Grouping,* Research Summary 1953-68, Research Division.

Found that tracking had multiple meanings in a variety of settings; that it had yet to prove itself as an effective and efficient way to meet the individual needs of all pupils; that more and better research was needed; that objectives, materials, curriculum, and teaching methods should change when instructing groups at different ability levels; and that "ability groups should be appropriate to the intellectual-emotional-social needs of pupils, the skills of the teacher, the type of learning desired, and the nature of the subject matter" (p. 44).

☐ 1972 *Violations of Human and Civil Rights: Report of the Tenth National Conference on Civil and Human Rights in Education.*

Stated opposition to the use of standardized testing "as a method for 'sorting out' children into tracks or groups that maintain limited horizons and reinforce negative self-concepts" (p. 4).

☐ 1973-78 *Task forces and committee reports on the relationships among testing, tracking, and student outcomes, culminating in the 1978/1985 Resolution C-6, Standardized Testing of Students.*

"The National Education Association believes that standardized tests can be a useful student evaluation method.... The Association urges the continued monitoring of standardized tests to assure that they shall be bias-free. The Association urges its affiliates to guard against any misuse of standardized tests...."

☐ 1984 *An Open Letter to America on Schools, Students, and Tomorrow.*

"The NEA will continue to work for schools that give all students equal access to the best available and most advanced learning resources, regardless of their gender, age, race, national origin, religion, income, or place of residence...."

☐ 1987 *...And Justice for All,* NEA Executive Committee Study Group Reports on Ethnic Minority Concerns.

Found that schools often practice inappropriate tracking, to the detriment of minority students. Recommended further study of the effects of tracking on student outcomes. Also recommended the elimination of any and all types of discriminatory tracking.

☐ 1988 (January 20) *An Educator's Opinion, "The Alternative to Tracking,"* appearing in the bimonthly column of Mary Hatwood Futrell.

Found tracking has long been abused and misused and "economically disadvantaged students are far more likely than their middle-class or affluent peers to be labeled 'slow' or 'retarded.'"

☐ At the 1988 *Representative Assembly,* a new tracking resolution, C-28, was proposed and debated. The delegates, while finding the need for additional study and debate, passed the following resolution:

"The National Education Association believes that academic tracking based on socioeconomic status, race, or sex must be eliminated in all public school settings. The Association urges its affiliates to oppose these practices."

☐ 1988 *A Subcommittee of the NEA Executive Committee* was named by President Futrell to study academic tracking.

Result of the many questions raised during the debate over Resolution C-28.

☐ 1988 *NEA contracted with the Johns Hopkins University* for a major new study of student academic tracking.

To better understand the current state of academic tracking in schools, including what issues are being debated, what factors are being measured, and why differences of opinion exist, NEA contracted with the Johns Hopkins University (principal investigators: Jomills H. Braddock II and Robert E. Slavin) to comprehensively study academic tracking and to produce four topical reports. This study has produced the following reports:

(1) "Effects of Ability Grouping on Black, Hispanic, and White Students."

(2) "Tracking of Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, and White Students: National Patterns and Trends."

(3) "Alternatives to Tracking: Some Exemplary Cases from Practice."

(4) "Tracking Trends, Effects, and Alternatives."

☐ 1989 *Critical Issues Session on Academic Tracking at the May meeting of the NEA Board of Directors.*

To provide the Board of Directors with state-of-the-art knowledge about the pros and cons of academic tracking and to offer insight into differing researcher/practitioner positions, a Critical Issues Session was held during the May Directors meeting. Presenting at the session were Bob Slavin (Johns Hopkins University), Jeannie Oakes (RAND Corporation and UCLA), and Paul B. Hentz (Chair, NEA Caucus for Educators of Exceptional Children).

Following the presentations and discussion of the issue of tracking at the Critical Issues Session, the Board of Directors took an action directing

that the interim report on academic tracking include the following:

- the need for NEA to continue working with the issue of tracking and other issues regarding instructional change

- the need for fundamental change in preparing teachers to work in restructuring programs
- elimination of tracking addressed in the context of restructuring schools, appropriate class size, and reallocation of resources
- the principle of increasing expectations and achievement for all students.

☐ *1989 Seminar on the Regular Education Initiative (REI).*

☐ 1989-1990 Tracking issues were placed on the agendas of *all six regional meetings, both* of the *national conferences,* and the *NCUEA annual meeting.* These sessions were not hearings, but instead they were structured to gain maximum discussion and feedback from participants.

☐ 1989-1990 NEA/IPD disseminated, upon request, the NEA-commissioned tracking study by the Johns Hopkins University. Findings from this study and other research on academic tracking were published in *NEA Today.*

STUDENT TRACKING: A GUIDE TO COMMONLY USED TERMS

The following terms are often used in discussions of student tracking. Some are synonyms for tracking. As a group, they capture a wide array of grouping practices.

Tracking is the practice of dividing students into separate classes for high, average, and low achievers.

Between-Class Ability Grouping and *Ability-Grouped Class Assignments* are misnomers for tracking. Both are school-level arrangements by which students are assigned to classes.

Regrouping for Reading and Mathematics assigns students to heterogeneous classes for most of the day, but regroups them according to achievement level for one or more subjects (usually reading and mathematics).

Ability Grouping is a school selection system that groups students on the basis of ability and differentiates instruction by quantity and intensity of work. Typically, this system segregates students all or most of the day and bases placement on general ability or achievement rather than skill in a specific subject. Usually it includes special programs for the gifted and special education for students with learning problems.

The Joplin Plan is a form of regrouping in which students remain in heterogeneous classes except for reading, are grouped strictly according to reading level, and are constantly reevaluated, and in which all achievement levels are accommodated. For example, a reading class at the fifth grade, first semester level, might include high-achieving fourth graders, average fifth graders, and low-achieving sixth graders. This approach, once common in elementary schools, originated in Joplin, Missouri.

Grouping for Instruction is a teacher-initiated system of grouping within a class for specific instructional purposes and brief periods. (Same as *Within-Class Grouping.*)

Within-Class Grouping refers to teachers' common practice of assigning students in their classroom to one of a small number of groups on the basis of their ability level. The groups work on different materials at rates unique to their needs and abilities. Within-class ability grouping is nearly universal in elementary reading instruction and is common in elementary mathematics. Within-class ability grouping introduces the problem of management of multiple groups. When the teacher is instructing one reading group, for example, the remaining students must work independently on seatwork activities, which may be of questionable value (see Anderson, Brubaker, Alleman-Brooks, & Duffy, 1985). (Same as *Grouping for Instruction.*)

Heterogeneous Grouping is the absence of a structured grouping plan based on students' ability. Students are assigned to a classroom irrespective of such factors as intelligence, social maturity, or achievement.

Cooperative Learning refers to various instructional methods in which students work in small, heterogeneous learning groups toward some sort of group goal. Cooperative learning differs from within-class ability grouping because the groups are heterogeneous and they engage in a

task-focused activity, such as studying together or completing a group assignment.

Nongraded Programs or Plans include a variety of approaches in which students are placed in flexible groups based on their performance, not their age. Grade-level designations are removed. The curriculum for each subject is divided into levels through which students progress at their own rate.

Between-Grade Grouping is found in schools that allow students at different grade levels to be grouped together for a particular subject. This grouping can be either heterogeneous or homogeneous.

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